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ABSTRACT

This case study of artist/researcher Ursula Kolbe was undertaken in 1998 to extend understanding of the complexity of the process of teaching and learning in respect to children's interactions with visual arts materials. The following questions prompted the research: how does a teacher who is also an artist work with young children? and does a background in visual arts influence a teacher's orientation toward children's graphic and three-dimensional work in the way that teacher interacts with children? Data were collected by observation of Kolbe's interactions with children aged 20 months to 6 years at the Institute of Early Childhood, a school at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. Coding patterns of interaction that appeared in transcripts from the audiotaped interactions enabled the researcher to identify the recurrent themes of Kolbe's practice. Interviews with Kolbe allowed perspectives, rationale, and approaches to be clarified. Identification of recurrent themes resulted in the selection of four key principles: (1) furthering skills in visual discrimination and enhancing the aesthetic qualities in children's work; (2) ensuring that physical conditions support exploration; (3) recognizing and acknowledging children's conceptual interests in graphic and three-dimensional work; and (4) extending children's work in visual education. This case study provides an insight into the way an Australian teacher, with a background in the visual arts and a strong interest in the Reggio Emilia approach, works with young children. (Contains 13 references.) (BT)

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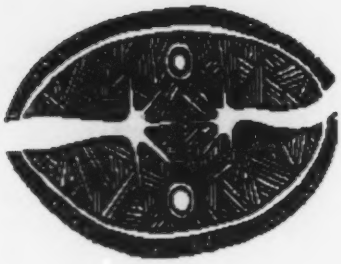

"Eye to Eye: An Artist /Teacher and Young Children, A Case Study

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EYE TO EYE: AN ARTIST/TEACHER AND YOUNG CHILDREN, A CASE STUDY

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Few studies of teaching practice analyse the complex interactions that take place in situations involving young children, working with art materials under the guidance of a teacher with expertise in visual arts. It seemed likely that a case study of a teacher with visual arts training could provide some insight into the kinds of interactions likely to extend young children's image- making. Ursula Kolbe was an ideal candidate for this case study. She has worked in the field of early childhood education for twenty-five years as artist/teacher, writer, film-maker and lecturer. At the Institute of Early Childhood, a school at Macquarie University in Sydney, she lectured in visual arts education. She continues to work with young children at *Mia-Mia* Child and Family Study Centre, a demonstration long daycare centre at the Institute.

Kolbe's strong background in the visual arts has given her a particular vision - a vision where her respect for children's graphic solutions and their innate sense of order is paramount. Kolbe's view of children and their capacity to make meaning with visual arts materials has been reinforced by her extended visits to the schools of Reggio Emilia in Northern Italy in the 1990s.

The "Reggio Emilia approach" (Edwards, Gandini and Forman,1998) has attracted international attention. The Reggio Emilia educators regard visual representation as one of the many "symbolic languages" through which children make sense of their world. They have continued to explore the cognitive potential of this domain within which children have access to a range of media with their own special "affordances" (Forman, 1998). They create environments to encourage multiple ways of seeing, where children can learn through interaction with each other. Integral to this approach is the allocation of designated areas for working with materials to encourage complexity of thought and sustained exploration.

The case study
The case study of artist/teacher Ursula Kolbe was undertaken in 1998 in order to extend understanding of the complexity of the process of teaching and learning in respect to children's interactions with visual arts materials. The following questions prompted this research: *How does a teacher who is also an artist work with young children? Does a background in the visual arts influence a teacher's orientation towards children's graphic and three- dimensional work in the way she interacts with children?*

Method:
The project took place over a three-month period (15th July - 15th October 1998). The data was collected by observation of Kolbe's interactions with children aged 20 months to 6 years. (Approximately 65 interactions of children were observed, with more than half taking place in long daycare and almost half in a public school). The method is described by Burns(1994:259) as "participant observation...a process of waiting to be impressed by recurrent themes that reappear in various contexts".

Situations where children were using several different media sometimes required the participation of all available adults including the researcher. In these instances the researcher relied on the recorded dialogue and a reconstruction of the experience via interview with Kolbe. In all of the interactions observed, audio-tape was used to check accuracy of reporting of language. Observation of body language and physical interactions, where appropriate, were noted.

Coding patterns of interaction that appeared in the transcriptions from the audio-taped interactions, enabled the researcher to identify the "recurrent themes" or key principles of practice. Informal and semi-structured interviews with Kolbe allowed perspectives, rationale and approaches to be clarified. Kolbe's own documentation of her work with children, as well as the researcher's journal, were useful sources for the analysis of conceptual concerns, philosophy of teaching and the identification of dominant influences.

Discussion:
The identification of "recurrent themes" resulted in the selection of four key principles of Kolbe's practice. The complexity of the process of teaching and learning in respect to children's interactions with visual arts materials cannot be underestimated. In reality these "principles of practice", key to Kolbe's teaching, are inextricably linked. Many of the examples discussed reveal how these four principles are inter-related in practice. The principles selected, after careful examination of the transcripts, were:
Furthering skills in visual discrimination and enhancing the aesthetic qualities in children's work; ensuring that physical conditions support exploration; recognising and acknowledging children's conceptual interests in graphic and three- dimensional work and extending children's work in visual exploration.

Furthering skills in visual discrimination and enhancing the aesthetic qualities in children's work
Art educators place considerable importance on developing children's ability to perceive such elements as colour, size, shape and texture. But how exactly can teachers of young children support their developing skills in visual discrimination within the context of their everyday experiences?

"Defamiliarisation"
"Defamiliarisation" is one of the approaches used by the Reggio Emilia educators to develop visual discrimination. Rabitti (1994: 61) refers to this concept as 'the skill to defamiliarise situations, daily events as well as objects". The concept is also addressed by Kolbe (1996b).

As an artist, Kolbe is interested in the use of images that seem ordinary until reassembled to open up new possibilities of interpretation. Torn and cut pieces allow Kolbe to explore new relationships in her work. This process is significant because the "visual surprises" thrown up by the new placements give her new ideas. As Kolbe (1996b:2)states, 'By creating visual surprises artists trigger in themselves new ways of seeing.' Her preference for this way of working undoubtedly influences her way of using 'visual surprise' with children. For example, in an experience designed in response to the techniques used by John Burningham in his picture book *Cloudland*, a small group of six year old children used their cut-out human figures to explore different positions of their figures on the painted clouds created by another group of children. The element of play was integral to their discovery of new relationships.

The importance of play
The opportunity to play with materials is important for many artists. Play enables artists to suspend judgments, to try new combinations, to try to make connections between different ideas, to break out of their usual ways of doing things and to liberate their thinking by investigating contradictions (Amabile,1989). Kolbe cherishes this in her own art- making and equally acknowledges the importance of play in children's image-making. The element of play was significant in the experience just described, in the following way. Observing the changing nature of the figure- ground relationships, the children became aware of a range of possibilities as they superimposed their figures on the painted clouds. Discovering what happens when one shape overlaps another was an important part of this process. Encounters such as the following were observed: 'My figure is somersaulting over yours,' and "This figure is chasing that one. Let's put this one here - no, that's too close. Move it over a bit."

The opportunity to play not only extended their involvement with each other, but also gave the children the opportunity to perceive subtle differences in the contours of their shapes that were easier to distinguish on a different coloured background. Some children noticed how the painted background could bring about a difference in time or atmosphere, often delighting in the apparent contradictions or offering explanations. "It's night-time, but this girl's still awake!" and "This boy's running to get out of the wind".

Extending children's visual discrimination
Natural objects, such as shells and pine needles, are valued in many early childhood settings and are often offered as materials, for example, in collage experiences. Observing the interest shown by several three and four-year-olds in the surfaces and forms of the natural materials in the centre, Kolbe, in collaboration with the teacher, chose a different approach which focussed on the arrangement of the objects. Kolbe (1998:1) explains that "problems with gluing can draw attention away from the appearance of natural objects, lessen children's perceptive sensibilities towards shapes and textures, and may even detract from children's sheer enjoyment in them".

Rectangular and subsequently circular pieces of felt, placed on solid trays or plates, provided surfaces for arranging seedpods, pine needles and assorted shells and pebbles. These natural materials were offered in separate baskets, to offer the children choices based on their preference for shape, surface or colour. The following observation of two children, aged three and four, revealed they had definite preferences for a certain

kind of shell. Sophia deliberately chose materials based on size (she requested a "little" shell) while Matt appeared to be more interested in surface ("I need "soft ones"). They both used objects to encircle the perimeter of the shape and communicated this intention to each other.

Matt: (circles with finger around the perimeter of the circle) It's gonna join up to there.

Sophia: (points to gap where shells will join up) When mine gets to here.... I'll be finished.

Selection and positioning of natural objects within a specific shape and an interest in order was apparent. Kolbe acknowledged Matt's interest in the smooth surfaced shells and his desire for closure, by saying, "I'm seeing you're choosing the one kind. You're going round with the shells." In her panel documentation for families Kolbe (1998:2) also made some general observations about the children's arrangements, noting that "... some (were) in rows with regular intervals in between, others in radial configurations, others in asymmetric arrangements, but positioning always shows care and deliberation". These experiences also offered the children opportunities to focus on spatial relationships, for example, small shapes within a larger shape, without the technical difficulties associated with gluing and pasting.

As will be discussed later in this paper, the removal of obstacles and the provision of technical support can assist children's visual discrimination. For example, four- year- old Jenna made a kind of checkerboard as she placed curved shells on either side of long pine needles on a circular plate. When Jenna experienced difficulty with fitting the long pine needles into the circle, Kolbe offered to cut them into smaller pieces for her. Thus Jenna was not distracted by the task of cutting - a difficult challenge with this bulky kind of material - and was able to properly focus on her arrangement of natural materials.

Ensuring that physical conditions support exploration

Kolbe believes that children are entitled to physical conditions of good quality to encourage concentration. She counters a popular notion that to make art one needs a messy environment. Her concern is to identify obstacles that make the process of artmaking difficult for children. She explains, "Having a pot wobbling is unsatisfactory for children and for children with physical disabilities it's even more important that nothing jiggles or moves" (Interview, October,1998. The discomfort of having dirty hands marked by paint, for instance, can distract children from the process of painting. Reminding toddlers that they might like to clean their hands on a paper towel is as important to Kolbe as setting up the paints and easels. For older children Kolbe provides a sponge on each table for removing excess paint from their brushes so that children are not distracted by dribbling paint. Removing lids from paint pots ensures that children can see colours clearly.

Providing opportunities for exploration with visual media

In order for children to use a particular medium for communication they need to become familiar with its properties and its capabilities. Forman (1994:37-38)) refers to the value of the different "affordances" of media by discussing how "the physical properties of media influence thought ...and help to define the message to be expressed". This implies that children need ample opportunities for exploring the intrinsic characteristics of media and practice in using them.

Most of the three-dimensional experiences observed in this study involve the use of clay.In the following extract, Kolbe likens facility in working with clay to being proficient in a language with appropriate 'vocabulary' and by implication, a grammar of forms.

> Clay is a 'language' through which they can explore and play around with ideas three-dimensionally. Individual children's discoveries and development of technical skills such as making coils, slabs, upright vertical structures, arches, and the like, become part of their individual "vocabularies" or repertoires. (They) are commented upon and thus affirmed whenever appropriate. (1996a:163).

An understanding of construction techniques is crucial for form building in clay. Kolbe is sensitive to the moment when these skills need to be taught - that is when the child can see a reason for learning them. Kolbe encourages children to share their skills in building forms, not only to promote a co-operative work ethic, but because she may be engaged with another group of children at the very moment a child needs technical support.

Kolbe 's teaching about the purpose of specific materials and her encouragement of peer collaboration is illustrated in the following anecdote:

Matt	Jim	Sofia	Kolbe
(Tries to use the slurry by brushing it on the table.)		Not yet Matt.	Sofia's right. Wait till you've made something. If you put slurry over everything it gets wet and sticky. I'll put the slurry back here and bring it back when you need it.
	Slurry's used for joining - and it is a bit like glue.		
			You're right, it is a bit like glue. I'll tell you how I made it - I put water in the clay and mixed it.
Matt puts some slurry on a piece of clay and joins it to another piece."I've made a tower".			Good, Matt - you've worked out how to use the slurry.
			Yes, I see you have, Matt.
Matt uses the slurry to join another piece to his tower.)		Make it bigger, Matt: Put some slurry there.	
			You need both hands. Jim, why don't you help Matt?

(A method of recording, devised by Janet Robertson, toddler teacher at Mia- Mia, has been used as a basis for recording for this short interaction).

Demystifying techniques and materials is an important aspect of Kolbe's approach. As can be seen in the above anecdote, Kolbe acknowledges that slurry is like glue and gives Matt sound knowledge of its composition. As Katz (1998: 35) comments about teaching tools and techniques:

> Such teaching invariably includes giving the child - in simple form - the principle underlying a suggested technique or approach to materials. The inclusion of the principle within a suggestion increases the chances that the child will be able to solve the problem when the adult is not there

Recognising and acknowledging children's conceptual concerns in graphic and three- dimensional work

Kolbe believes that her background in the visual arts has probably sharpened her ability to appreciate children's struggles and intentions with visual media. She comments (1994:162):

> ....my background training in the visual arts ... enables me to empathise with what children are attempting to do - either in controlling a medium, or in a compositional or structural sense. An awareness of how the properties and constraints of various representational media affect what children are able to do with media and hence influence thought, inevitably informs my practice and predicates how I interact with the children.

Planning time for learning about children's insights

It is often difficult for teachers to find time to reflect on children's work and the directions they may want to pursue. Yet this is often one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching. Making connections is a creative act. Teachers who look closely at children's work, may begin to see how children are working through their ideas with different media.

Kolbe often compares drawings children have made by placing them side by side, to try to understand what ideas in particular they are grappling with. For example, looking at six- year- old Cam's four drawings of tree roots, Kolbe could hardly contain her excitement:

> Cam's certainly got into what might be under the ground... because there **will** be tunnels, and creatures lurking around. And it'll be a mass of interlocking lines - of pathways and roots...some made by creatures and others made by roots.

These reflections on a child's drawings and other available material such as the child's anecdotal description, may lead to further possibilities for extension work. For example, musing on Cam's drawings Kolbe thinks she might ask Cam to show her what might be happening inside the roots. Edwards(1998:188) explains that the teacher can play an important role in "helping the children uncover their own insights or questions, perhaps expressed in a tentative or partial way - not fully clear to themselves ". Having their previous work available not only reveals connections in ideas they have been exploring, but also reminds them of their solutions to technical problems. As Kolbe says, " it is useful to be able to say to a child, remember how you made this clay person stand up....look, here's the person you made last week." (Interview, November 1998).

Extending children's work in visual exploration

According to Clements (1992), the nature of children's graphic response is affected by teacher's attitudes and responses. Kolbe uses several approaches to enable children to realise their potential. Some examples follow.

Encouraging children to work carefully

Children who are not used to a culture of image - making will often draw with great haste, so that the drawing looks slapdash or unfinished. It is hardly conducive to further work. By encouraging children to work carefully, Kolbe offers children opportunities to see more and consequently become more involved with the object or idea. When a six-year-old announced, "I've finished my drawing!" Kolbe remarked, "I see you have - would you like to draw me another now, more slowly so you can show me more about what you've seen." Another way of communicating that children are capable of more complex work is the suggestion to" come back and work on it later." (Outdoor clay area, 5/8/98). This signals to the child the expectation that she has more to explore when she is ready.

Posing a question or new challenge

When several four- year- old children were making a system of clay roads together, Kolbe posed questions such as: *What's going to happen to this road? What do cars need? What happens when the cars get to the bump that Sean made?* She also recognised and valued the thinking revealed in children's interactions. When Jade announced: "I'm making a plane" Gina patiently explained to Jade: "Well, there's no sky, so you'll have to hold it!" Kolbe took careful note of Gina's observation that the children had made the context for the cars (the system of roads) but not the context for the plane (the sky).

Suggesting change in scale

In terms of increasing complexity in claywork, Kolbe sometimes encourages children to work with bigger pieces. Larger scaled works can offer the opportunity to build more complex structures and may sustain interest. Consider the following episode with three-year-olds (recorded 29 July, 1998, at the outdoor clay table):

Lila: I'm making little balls.

Kolbe: Yes, I can see. .....Lila, those little balls are getting so small they might get lost. Would you like Kris to help you make a ball that's a bit bigger? (Kris adds more clay to one of Lila's balls).

Kolbe: What have we here Lila? Three balls! One small, one large, one medium... They're much bigger Lila. Now they won't get lost.

Lila: I'm making an even bigger, bigger ball.

Reflecting on this episode, Kolbe considered that Lila may have been getting enough satisfaction from what she could already do- making a series of tiny balls of clay. Aware of the skills of Lila's companion, however, she decided to challenge Lila to work with bigger pieces of clay. In view of the pace of these interactions and the necessity of making quick decisions, Kolbe's close engagement with this experience was crucial.

Establishing a climate for careful looking and thinking

The notion of "careful looking and thinking" is an important part of Kolbe's practice as artist and teacher. Kolbe offers the following suggestion:

> You need to establish a climate where drawing is considered serious business - that you work at it,...that you do several versions of one thing.... You make it possible for children to enrich their visual vocabulary.... by asking them to show you more of things they've noticed. It's like asking them to say more in words.... they have to enrich their vocabulary. (Interview 5/10/98)

For instance, a gnarled tree root provided the stimulus for a series of rich experiences with a class of six-year-olds who had recently completed some leaf rubbings. The following extract from the researcher's journal reveals Kolbe's thinking about the potential of the tree root to spark the interest of the children:

> I have a fantastic gnarled piece - a fragment of a trunk - it could be a bonsai. I'd love to show Alicia.... to show her that she has the ability to draw things other than the girl figures that she always draws. I'd like to ask the children how the roots might have gone on growing - under the ground. I think I'll use drawing because the children do not yet have enough techniques in clay. Their techniques are not yet sophisticated enough to match the sophistication of their thinking. I'd like to pose a question: What happens underground and who's under the ground? (*From her shelves she chooses a book by Hoffman and Ray, 1995, which has illustrations of elaborate tunnels and animals which burrow*). (Pause)... I could have some clay there just in case... if you start with coils, (*Thinking of their long, curved forms*).....you've got roots! (Journal entry, 9/8/98)

Looking more closely at the stages in Kolbe's thinking process, we may come to some understanding of the web of relationships embedded in her planning for children's art experiences. This process is indicative of the way decisions made about media, children, an individual child and particular resources (natural and print), are inextricably linked. For instance, the coincidental resemblance between the form of the tree roots and coils of clay convince Kolbe that, though the children's experience with clay is limited, she should provide clay as an optional material for this experience.

Conclusion

For the teacher with no specialist visual arts training this study highlights some areas for consideration. The establishment of a climate for looking closely at things makes it possible for young children to enlarge their visual vocabulary. In this way they can become competent in using visual media to explore ideas, and to communicate them to others. Teachers of young children might consider allowing time for children to make important visual discoveries and for reviewing children's graphic work so that conceptual interests can be clearly identified. "Defamiliarisation" of objects or aspects of the environment, can awaken new perceptions and give teachers insights into children's thinking.

This case study provides an insight into the way an Australian teacher, with a background in the visual arts and a strong interest in the Reggio Emilia approach, works with young children. The study focussed on patterns of interaction to extend understanding of the complexity of teaching where experiences involve visual arts materials. These patterns of interaction reveal that Ursula Kolbe's approach is substantially different from those who believe that art should be taught for its own sake as a distinct subject. She believes that art is integral to children's everyday life and that children can reveal their thinking though their image-making.

Burns (1994:314) points out that case studies" can provide insights into the class of events from which the case has been drawn". Further case studies of artists who work with young children would provide a range of data for exploring the particular approaches used by artist/teachers to develop children's thinking in graphic and three- dimensional media. This would not only assist artists who wish to work with children, but teachers who wish to use artists' intimate knowledge of their field.

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